Judit Takács

Short note on the sexophobic state-socialist hobby-horse of western researchers

In the following I will share some of my thoughts on the article "Bumbling Idiots or Evil Masterminds? Challenging Cold War Stereotypes about Women, Sexuality and State Socialism" (Ghodsee – Lišková 2016). I have to admit that I started to write these comments because the authors misquoted one of my articles on disciplining gender and (homo)sexuality in state-socialist Hungary in the 1970s (Takács 2015).

In the (mis)quoted article I have examined various sources of knowledge about the social existence of sexuality, including media representations, experimental school programmes, and a unique research project on sexuality-related value orientation of young Hungarian workers and university students in the 1970s. – But clearly Ghodsee and Lišková haven't really paid attention to the content of the whole article: they have just used two sentences taken out of their original context, and presented these as if they were not based on empirical work. Naturally it isn't and has never been my expectation that others interpret the data collected and/or presented by me exactly the same way as I have done it: most of the time there are several interpretational frameworks that can make sense (and sometimes alternative interpretations might make possibly more sense than mine). However, if one refers to this specific article by denying the fact that its findings have been based on empirical data collection, I perceive that as an attempt to distort my scientific credibility and as an act of unprofessional and unethical practice.

The authors set quite ambitious goals for themselves when trying to detect and unmask those (western?) agents who try to mislead their learned colleagues by presenting unsubstantiated statements on women and sexuality and state-socialism as common knowledge, which "derives, in fact, from western Cold War rhetoric" (Ghodsee – Lišková 2016:489). In this context the authors can be seen as not only able and willing to enlighten the public about the tricks that were used in the process of spreading misinformation but luckily, they are also able to point to good practice (of their own and some others). In the meanwhile, the authors also try to provide guidelines on how (not) to present 'common knowledge' in academic writing. They list some alarming examples to avoid – and luckily they are able to present some good practice (including their own), here too.

Judit Takács: Research Chair, Centre for Social Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, Országház u. 30., H-1014; E-mail: takacs.judit@tk.mta.hu

The article is structured around two main questions: the first one – "What counts as 'common knowledge' in general?" (Ghodsee – Lišková 2016:492) – is covered in about one page length, while the second one – "What counts as 'common knowledge' about 20th century communism in Eastern Europe?" (Ghodsee – Lišková 2016:493) – is covered more extensively in about seven pages, leading to a one-page Conclusion. These length parameters can already indicate the limited depth of the discussion considering the potentially huge phenomenological, epistemological, historical and geographical scope of these issues.

However, the most serious problem of the article is of methodological nature: the basis of the authors' arguments is a selection of quotations, but it is not discussed at all how this selection came about. It cannot be known how these quotations were found. Were there any search terms used; any specific selection criteria, search engines or timelines applied? These questions remain unanswered. In fact, there is no mention of any kind of methodological consideration of data collection and selection at all in the whole article.

However, without these methodological details it is hard to maintain the validity of the main point of the article, which is – I believe – about the existence of the "burgeoning bodies of scholarship demonstrating that state socialist citizens had robust and fulfilling sexual lives" (Ghodsee – Lišková 2016:498). In this sentence there are six references listed, including Lišková's own article in a Sexualities journal special issue on "The science of sex in a space of uncertainty: Naturalizing and modernizing Europe's East, past and present"; but more interestingly, the authors here use the short introductory essay of this special issue as a reference, where Renkin and Kościańska briefly contextualize and introduce the four articles of the special issue that "address discourses, practices, and implications of the science of sex in Central and Eastern Europe" (Renkin – Kościańska 2016:161), and if one reads the three other articles besides Lišková's, it becomes quite clear that their main content is not about the "robust and fulfilling sexual lives" of anyone. Another reference in this list is of Dagmar Herzog's book on *Sex after Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany*, where she does indeed emphasize the following:

> "Reading the evolution of debates about sex in East Germany in turn encourages the revision of assumptions now standard among historians and other social scientists about gender relations in East Germany. The Western feminist master narrative of East German women as lamentably doubly burdened by work force participation and domestic chores despite the formally egalitarian rhetoric of the regime is complicated by attention to the history of sexuality. For instance, there is no question that East German women's growing economic independence from men profoundly affected

> heterosexual power dynamics. Taking sex seriously as a vital, consequential, and complex arena of human activity—as significant a matter as labor relations or political attitudes and, indeed, intricately interconnected with these—helps us see East German women as increasingly confident subjects with strong negotiating power vis-a-vis both their male partners and the state. It allows us as well to bring into view the distinctive egalitarian style of heterosexual masculinity developed among the younger generation in East Germany. Moreover, and crucially, as developments in the GDR in the 1970s and 1980s especially show, sex eventually became a crucial free space in this otherwise profoundly unfree society. Whether this indirectly strengthened the regime's control or should be read as a genuine democratic achievement is a question that remains open. Perhaps both are true" (Herzog 2005: 187-188).

Herzog very clearly speaks about East Germany in this quotation, while in one of her more recent books on *Sexuality in Europe: A Twentieth-Century History*, she provides an overview of other Eastern Bloc countries, too:

> "…in the Stalinist era (and in this way in profound contrast with the minority of sex-radical Bolsheviks that had tried to set the tone in the 1920s), Soviet Communism relied on an intolerant and negative view of sex. Self-discipline and marital and family stability were demanded for the sake of both the nation and the Communist Party. […] Over and over, also for Soviet-ruled Poland and Ukraine, commentators retrospectively observe that issues relating to the body and to sexuality were treated as taboo, passed over in silence – not just because sex was considered something problematic and "bad" that required suppression and control, but also because of a more general state hostility to individual autonomy and freedom in personal relations. In addition, as it has been remarked for Hungary, a major aim of postwar social policies restricting access to contraception and abortion was to restore a semblance of prewar normality by restoring gender hierarchies.
>
> This does not mean that the population did not find its own path. […] already by the 1960s there would be an evident relaxation of popular mores, accompanied also by an increase in debate about sexual matters among medical and social scientific professionals – trends particularly noticeable in East Germany and Czechoslovakia, which had older sex-positive traditions to build on. But there is no question that in the Cold War era the Eastern European and Soviet media were tight-lipped on the subject of pleasure.
>
> Yet a further factor operative in Eastern Bloc countries, especially in the first ten to fifteen postwar years, was the extreme poverty and material privation, coupled with inadequate and extraordinarily overcrowded housing that made privacy and indulgence in extended intimacy all but impossible. From Belgrade to Budapest to Warsaw, multigenerational families packed into tiny, one- or at best two-bedroom apartments, often sharing the WC and kitchen with other families" (Herzog 2011: 100-101).

In the latter book Herzog also quotes the "venerable Soviet sex researcher Igor Kon" (Herzog 2011:100) who pointed out in his work on *Sexual Revolution in Russia*: *From the Age of the Czars to Today* that the "entire history of Soviet culture, from start to finish, consists of out-and-out campaigns and mandates in which sexophobia plays a leading part" (Kon 1995:68).

These examples clearly illustrate how important it would have been for the authors to apply a more systematic methodological approach: as a more systematic selection of quotes would have revealed not only that describing Soviet type societies as "sexophobic" might not only been the hobby-horse of Western researchers, but also that 'purposive sampling', even when applied to fragments of texts, can carry the risk of reflecting more of the authors' subjective judgement than sound scientific results.

In addition, the subjective strategies applied by the authors to highlight the validity of their argument remotely remind me of what Edward Stein described in the concluding chapter of the edited volume of *Forms of Desire*: "some critics of social constructionism claim that the version of essentialism with which some people contrast social constructionism is a straw man;[2] essentialism, these critics say, is really a construction of the social constructionists" (Stein 1992: 326). Along a similar vein, the authors tried constructing their own opposing arguments – a straw man, so to say, made of quotations and even misquotations – to underline the alleged originality of their thought.

However, in spite of all these efforts, and precisely because of the article's substantial methodological shortcomings, the authors' key message about state socialist citizens' "robust and fulfilling sexual lives" (Ghodsee – Lišková 2016:498) sounds like one of those incriminating generalizations about sexuality that "cannot be made about all socialist countries in all historical eras" as the authors rightly point out a few sentences later (Ghodsee – Lišková 2016:498-499).

In conclusion, I would like to express my hope that the authors will continue their thought-provoking work in an empirically better supported, methodical way, and will be able to come up with arguments the validity of which does not need to be supported by constructing a straw man of any kind.

2 References can be found at footnote 2 in the original text (Stein 1992: 326).

Bibliography

Ghodsee, Kristen – Lišková, Kateřina (2016), "Bumbling Idiots or Evil Masterminds? Challenging Cold War Stereotypes about Women, Sexuality and State Socialism", *Filozofija i društvo* XXVII (3): 489–503.

Herzog, Dagmar (2005), *Sex after Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Herzog, Dagmar (2011), *Sexuality in Europe. A Twentieth-Century History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kon, Igor S. (1995), *Sexual Revolution in Russia*: *From the Age of the Czars to Today*. New York: Free Press.

Renkin, Hadley – Kościańska, Agnieszka (2016), "The science of sex in a space of uncertainty: Naturalizing and modernizing Europe's East, past and present", *Sexualities* 19 (1/2): 159–167.

Stein, Edward (1992 [1990]), "The Essentials of Constructionism and the Construction of Essentialism", in: Stein, Edward (ed.) *Forms of Desire*. New York and London: Routledge, pp. 325–354.

Takács, Judit (2015), "Disciplining gender and (homo)sexuality in state-socialist Hungary in the 1970s". *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 22 (1):161–175.